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ABSTRACT

The increasingly wide-spread controversy surrounding the subject of Black English is the subject of this document. This presentation consists of two parts. The first part reports an experimental study undertaken to determine attitudes of some educators toward Black English. Caucasian and Negro teachers were administered a Language Attitude Scale to determine their attitudes toward the following: (1) the structure of Black English, (2) the consequences of using (or not using) and accepting (or rejecting) Black English, (3) the importance of Black English to the speakers of it, and (4) the cognitive and intellectual abilities of speakers of Black English. Results show that language attitudes vary both racially and on educational levels. Part II of this presentation takes a closer look at these attitudes. Educators concerned with the problems of the disadvantaged have, in recent years, encountered an increasing amount of failure in trying to carry out what they see as their basic task. This failure is related to a faulty understanding of the use of language and of the attitudes toward language use. Two views toward Black English may be identified: (1) an older view based on a deficit model in which the dialect is considered inferior, (2) a more recent view based on a difference model which accepts the premise that all dialects possess internal validity. It is concluded that the educational establishment must come to view Black English as another dialect of English. (CK)

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A Sociolinguistic Comment on the Changing Attitudes toward the Use of Black English and An Experimental Study to Measure Some of Those Attitudes*

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In the November 28, 1970 issue of The New Republic Olivia Mellan asks the question, "Black English: Why Try to Eradicate It?" In the September 1970 ASHA Journal Joan Baratz asks "Should Black Children Learn White Dialect?" And in the November 22, 1970 edition of The Atlanta Journal and Constitution Marvin Loflin states that indeed "The English of Some Blacks does Differ... (but he insists further that it must be) Defended."

This increasingly wide-spread controversy surrounding the subject of Black English is our concern today. For as professionals in Speech Communication we are intimately involved with this issue. Our views on the subject of Black English significantly influence our behavior toward the speakers of it, particularly in our role as educators.

This presentation today, consists of two parts. The first part is the report of an experimental study undertaken to determine attitudes of some educators toward Black English. The second part is a sociolinguistic comment on the nature of those attitudes particularly as they reflect a contrast between the "deficit" and "difference" models.

What are the attitudes of educators toward Black English and its speakers? For the purposes of this paper a survey of teachers was undertaken. Two groups were included: sixty-four faculty members of Shaw University in Raleigh (Wake County), North Carolina and two hundred elementary and secondary teachers in Wake County, North Carolina. They were administered a Language Attitude Scale devised by the Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, D. C. The Shaw faculty members were administered the questionnaire during orientation week at the beginning of the school year, 1970. The Wake County teachers were given the test during a two-week desegregation workshop in the summer of 1970.

Of the sixty-four Shaw educators, forty-three were black and twenty-one were white. Of the two hundred other teachers, sixty-nine blacks and one hundred ninety-three whites responded to the question indicating race on the biographical data form appended to the questionnaire.

The questionnaire, which consists of twenty-five statements, seeks to determine the attitudes of the respondents to various facets of Black English. These facets consist of (1) the structure of Black English; (2) the consequences of using (or not using) and accepting (or rejecting) Black English; (3) the importance

of Black English to the speakers of it; and (4) the cognitive and intellectual abilities of speakers of Black English. Completion of the questionnaire followed the playing of a tape with samples of two English dialects--Black English and Appalachian English. The teachers were asked to react to the statements on a five point scale--SA (strongly agree), MA (mildly agree), N (neither agree nor disagree), MD (mildly disagree), and SD (strongly disagree.)

The following tables report the results of the study. The roman numerals represent the four attitude facets mentioned above. Table I shows how the total population ranked percentage-wise on a high, medium, or low basis. High, medium, and low were determined by setting the highest twenty-five percent of possible scoring as high, the middle fifty percent as middle and the lowest twenty-five percent as low.

Table I indicates the responses of the groups from Shaw and Wake County to the four categories outlined above. The percentages are based on the number of participants who responded to all of the questions in the category. The numbers of people who answered in each category are indicated. Both figures are based on a high, middle, or low evaluation.

Table II is a breakdown of Table I by color with the percentages and numbers indicating how the group of each race selected within their own group.

Language Attitude Scale Administered to 64 Shaw University Faculty and to 200 Wake County Elementary and Secondary School teachers*

TABLE I

		Shaw		Wake County	
		Responses	%	Responses	%
Category I	H	16	25.8	8	4.5
	M	43	69.4	131	74.0
	L	3	4.8	38	21.5
		62	100.0	177	100.0
Category II	H	25	40.3	36	19.2
	M	36	58.1	138	73.8
	L	1	1.6	13	7.0
		62	100.0	187	100.0
Category III	H	17	27.9	12	6.4
	M	41	67.2	145	77.1
	L	3	4.9	31	16.5
		61	100.0	188	100.0
Category IV	H	22	34.4	41	21.1
	M	37	57.8	125	64.5
	L	5	7.8	28	14.4
		64	100.0	194	100.0

TABLE II

		Shaw				Wake County			
		White		Black		White		Black	
		Responses	%	Responses	%	Responses	%	Responses	%
I	H	8	38.1	8	19.5	2	1.7	6	10.5
	M	13	61.9	30	73.2	80	67.8	49	86.0
	L	0	0.0	3	7.3	36	30.5	2	3.5
		21	100.0	41	100.0	118	100.0	57	100.0
II	H	13	61.9	12	29.3	15	12.3	20	31.7
	M	8	38.1	28	68.3	95	77.9	42	66.7
	L	0	0.0	1	2.4	12	9.8	1	1.6
		21	100.0	41	100.0	122	100.0	63	100.0
III	H	10	47.6	7	17.5	3	2.5	9	14.1
	M	11	52.4	30	75.0	93	76.2	51	79.7
	L	0	0.0	3	7.5	26	21.3	4	6.2
		21	100.0	40	100.0	122	100.0	64	100.0
IV	H	9	42.9	13	30.2	20	16.0	20	31.7
	M	12	57.1	25	58.2	88	70.4	32	50.8
	L	0	0.0	5	11.6	17	13.6	11	17.5
		21	100.0	43	100.0	125	100.0	63	100.0

Category I concerns attitudes about the structure of Black English.
Category II concerns attitudes about the consequences of using (or not using) and accepting (or rejecting) Black English.
Category III concerns attitudes about the importance of Black English to the speakers of it.
Category IV concerns attitudes about the cognitive and intellectual abilities of speakers of Black English.

* The Language Attitude Scale is an instrument designed by the Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, D. C.

The results reflected in the tables indicate that the total Shaw faculty holds more positive attitudes toward the use of Black English than do the Wake County teachers. In addition, category II indicates that Shaw faculty recognize the importance of accepting Black English. Category I shows low attitudes of Wake County teachers regarding the structure of Black English.

The racial breakdown in the two sample groups revealed a difference. White Shaw faculty registered no low scores; White Wake County teachers registered more low responses in all categories than any other group. The high responses from white Shaw faculty were greater than for any other group. Black Shaw and black Wake County teachers scored very similarly in all categories.

What conclusions can be drawn from the tables and from the study itself? It is evident that language attitudes vary both racially and on educational levels. The reasons for the development of the attitudes in the teachers tested are many and complex. Perhaps a study of the geographical areas of birth and upbringing, of the education and occupation of parents, of level of training in the area of linguistics, of sex and age are variables to be considered in gaining an understanding of how and why these attitudes were formed. However, the scope of such research is beyond the purpose of this paper.

What is relevant is the fact that the teachers in this survey, particularly teachers of the elementary and secondary levels, hold attitudes that can operate to the detriment of the educational development of children.

A closer look at these attitudes is necessary. This is the purpose of the second part of this presentation.

Educators concerned with the problems of the disadvantaged have, in recent years, encountered an increasing amount of bewilderment, frustration and often failure in trying to carry out what they see as their basic task. No small part of their difficulty is concerned with the teaching of standard English to those ghetto students whose dialect is usually labelled sub- or nonstandard.

As linguists, sociologists, and psychologists have become interested in this problem, they have tended to support the view that the educator's failure is related to a faulty understanding of the use of language and of the attitudes toward language use.

Until recently the educator-teacher appears to have been relatively ignorant of the linguistic forms used by the ghetto minority, of the systematic nature of these forms, and of the attitudes of majority and minority group speakers towards their own and each other's language use. The term dialect, even when not used in a pejorative sense, rarely comprehended social (as opposed to regional) dialects, nor was

there a well-developed sense of awareness of the place social dialects occupy in a system. It is only in the past few years that information has been sought about the psychological tie of a speaker to his vernacular; about the attitudes of teachers toward nonstandard language forms and toward the speakers of such forms; about the educational effects of these attitudes; and about the aspirations of different minority groups, especially as they are related to the use of those language forms which are closely identified with the more prestigious speakers of the (white) middle and upper middle segments of society.

The results of this preliminary information gathering are evident in the changing views of Black English and of the possible methods of approaching the educational social problems it presents. It is important to trace these shifting views, to indicate some of the questions they raise, and to suggest some possible future directions for education, study, and research, especially with regard to the speakers of Black English in an urban setting.

In tracing the changing views of Black English (and other non-standard dialects as well) at least two fairly distinct schools of thought may be identified.

The first, and the older, is based on what some linguists, sociolinguists, and educators have come to call a deficit model.[1] In this view the dialect of the black speaker is considered inferior to the standard dialect as a means of communication. Often, this means more than simply a social handicap. In its extreme formulation this view maintains that the dialect both contributes to and reflects deficient cognitive processes[2] and intellectual capabilities.

sub/ Although the label 'standard,' formerly attached to this dialect, has generally given way to the label 'nonstandard,' it is probably true that those who espouse the deficit model maintain the hierarchical concept implied by the former term, no matter what they call Black English.

The deficit model concept underlies the approach to language instruction which attempts to change the language habits of those who speak a given dialect of the language by having them adopt, in its place, a form of standard (i.e., white, educated) English.[3]

In the past decade many linguists have sought to discredit the deficit model and to replace it with what is termed a difference model.[4] This view accepts the premise that all dialects possess what may be called internal validity.

That is, each dialectal subsystem serves as a complete, fully functioning and adequate tool of communication for and among those who use it. This is not to say that there are no differences between the various degrees of social acceptability of the different dialects within a community. On the contrary, such differences are recognized and in fact form the core of the problem to be met. What is denied is the notion that cognitive and intellectual inferiority can result from and/or underlie the use of nonstandard dialects of the language. Rather, dialect differences are seen as one part of the sum of cultural differences that distinguish (in a nonevaluative manner) one subculture from another, one speaker from another. It is the specification of these cultural differences that has recently occupied much of the attention of sociolinguists.

The difference model underlies the view that every dialect is open-ended in the sense that anything that can be said in one dialect may come to be said in another if the need arises. That is, in the long run, the principle of internal validity will render it unnecessary for the speakers of a particular dialect to switch codes in order to express or understand an

idea that has been formulated by the speakers of another dialect. The speaker's cognitive and expressive abilities do not basically reside in his dialect, but in his mind and in his ability to creatively use his dialect, an ability possessed by speakers of all dialects of all languages.[5]

We seem to be at a point now where most informed linguists, sociolinguists, and some educators have accepted the difference model as a basis for their training programs. Such acceptance, however, does not mean that there is a unanimity of opinion with regard to the goals of and pedagogic approaches to the programs in question. There are, in fact, some formidable differences of opinion. Let us examine some of the more prominent ideas associated with the various schools of thought which arise out of the difference model.

There is substantial support for the idea that all children should be taught to speak (as well as to read and write) standard English if they do not already do so upon entering school. Underlying this idea is the thought that Black English is nonstandard and that children using it must be "corrected," or at

least that their language forms must be changed or added to. That there is some similarity between this approach and that associated with the deficit model is readily apparent. The difference lies basically in the option of "adding to" the speaker's dialect another dialect, namely the standard forms. This option is preferred by most of the group who espouse the difference model, as opposed to the supporters of the deficit model.[6]

Up to this time, it must be admitted, there has been no general success in either changing or effectively supplementing with standard English the nonstandard forms of black ghetto speakers in our city schools, regardless of the model or approach underlying the attempt. Among the factors which are often cited as contributing to the failure of compensatory language programs in the schools is the possibility that the non- and substandard concept and classification of Black English causes teachers, both black and white, to deprecate its use and, by extension, its users and their culture.[7] A student-teacher relationship with this as a basis is not likely to change or eradicate anything, much less a first dialect to which the speaker is intensely loyal. As we have noted above, the change

in the prefix of the dialect label from sub to non is not likely to have any appreciable effect on the student-teacher relationship. Most teachers will (or have) merely assimilated the new label, assuming that it describes the same "bad" or "inferior" dialect that the previous term described.

Further, the methods of teaching a substitute or second dialect have been questioned. Some linguists feel that the standard forms should be taught to the ghetto speaker following the principles and procedures developed by teachers who are specialists in the teaching of English as a second language, rather than by speech therapists, for example, whose approach is to suppress the use of one phonological or morphological form and replace it with another.[8] At the moment, this state of affairs can hardly be said to exist in any general way. We simply lack the enormous body of teachers, trained in methods of teaching English as a second language (as adapted to the second dialect situation), that would be needed to meet the requirements of such a program.

A final factor contributing to the failure of school programs centers around the definition of standard English. While the schools are making vain attempts

to solve the problem of how to educate black children "up" to a standard dialect, the problem may be solving itself in terms of the current definition of standard English. This definition, in its most common form, unites the elements of community and education to specify that standard speakers are those members of a speech community who are educated. The vagueness of a definition of this sort is apparent, but that is not what is at issue here. Accepting the definition even in its least specific form will give rise to a host of complicated issues in the coming years. In the first place, we are now in a position where increasingly larger numbers of black (and other minority group) students are attending or will attend institutions of higher learning each year. The inability of the elementary and secondary schools to substantially alter the spoken language behavior of these students has thus far been mirrored in the colleges and re-enforced by attitudes which range from laissez-faire to "it's not my job to teach college students how to speak." Assuming that this state of affairs will remain essentially unchanged, we shall soon face a situation in which a clearly socially marked and stigmatized dialect will nonetheless fit

the accepted definition of standard speech by virtue of the fact that its speakers will be representative of the educated members of a (speech) community. Further, in the case of the ghetto speaker, the term "speech community" will perhaps take on greater specificity than for any other group of speakers.

This apparently paradoxical situation is capable of solution in a number of ways, some of which are indicative of the still changing views of black dialect. The solutions themselves raise a host of questions which, for the most part, still await answers.

One solution is to stand fast by the current definition of standard speech and all that it implies for the educated black speaker. This solution, of course, automatically removes the stigmatizing labels nonstandard and substandard. It does not, however, necessarily remove the stigma. The question is, does the stigma really reside in the dialect, or in the listener's attitude toward the speaker of the dialect? The latter possibility has been given consideration recently and deserves intensive study.[10] If the speaker's dialect receives its prestige from the socio-economic and ethnic group with which he is associated, then a strong case can be made for educating each speaker in his native dialect, allowing him to develop it as fully

as possible as a communicative tool, much as is done not with the speaker of what is presently called the standard dialect. Under these circumstances it would be hoped that the prestige of the ethnic, socio-economic group would be enhanced by improved educational and vocational opportunities and by education of the dominant culture in the acceptance of cultural differences.

Before we can arrive at such a state of affairs, however, it is plain that the thinking of the educational establishment must be overhauled with regard to Black English. Educators and teachers will have to come to the understanding that Black English can be treated as another dialect of English; that it would be normal for all blacks who grow up speaking that dialect to function in it; that both standard and non-standard forms of a black dialect can exist; and that a standard black dialect need be treated no differently from any other (regional) standard dialect of English. The Black English dialect will thus be projected without any pejorative, evaluative label (e. g., nonstandard), as no less prestigious and no less normal for its speakers than any other dialect of the language is to <u>its</u> speakers. If it be different, such does not make it pathological.

It may be, in the near future at least, that the education of the dominant culture and of the educational establishment in ways of understanding and acceptance may meet with only partial success. Similarly, resistance on the part of the black community, especially middle class Negroes, may at first make it difficult to instigate any program in which Black English is treated as a standard, although different, dialect of English,[11] one in which the ghetto student may at least be instructed initially and taught to read.

It seems to us, however, that considerable progress can be made in these directions by the linguists and sociolinguists who train the college student and, especially the teachers and educators of tomorrow. As revealed in the study reported at the beginning of this paper, it is possible for educators to hold positive views toward a different dialect and its speakers. Certainly the ideas which we seek to test and promulgate are not wholly new. Yet just as certainly the education of those who will bear the responsibility of marshalling support for these ideas is not nearly complete; nor do most of those who must work directly with the ghetto student have even a vague understanding that such ideas exist. That the considerable weight of informed, expert opinion should as of yet have had so little impact on all levels is unfortunately true. It should not be allowed to be true a moment longer than is necessary.

Footnotes

1. Joan C. Baratz, "Educational Considerations for Teaching Standard English to Negro Children," in Teaching Standard English in the Inner City, edited by Ralph W. Fasold and Roger W. Shuy (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1970), pp. 20-40.

2. Carl Bereiter et al, "An Academically Oriented Pre-School for Culturally Deprived Children," in Pre-School Education Today, edited by Fred M. Hechinger (New York: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 105-137. See also Carl Bereiter and Siegfried Engelmann, Teaching Disadvantaged Children in the Preschool (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

3. Robert Green, "Dialect Sampling and Language Values," in Social Dialects and Language Learning, edited by Roger Shuy (Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1965), pp. 122-123.

4. Baratz, "Educational Considerations."

5. Noam Chomsky, Aspects of the Theory of Syntax, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1965), p. 6. For an historical discussion of this concept see Noam Chomsky, Cartesian Linguistics (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 3-31.

6. Baratz, "Educational Considerations."

7. William Labov, "The Logic of Nonstandard English," in the Report of the Twentieth Annual Round Table Meeting on Linguistics and Language Study, edited by James E. Alatis (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, 1970), pp. 26-27.

8. William A. Stewart, "Foreign Language Teaching Methods in Quasi-Foreign Language Situations," in Non-Standard Speech and the Teaching of English, edited by William A. Stewart (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1964), pp. 1-15.

9. Thomas Kochman, "Culture and Communication: Implications for Black English in the Classroom," in the Florida FL Reporter, 7 (Spring/Summer, 1969), 87-88, 157.

10. William A. Stewart, "On the Use of Negro Dialect in the Teaching of Reading," in Teaching Black Children to Read, edited by Joan C. Baratz and Roger W. Shuy (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969), pp. 186-188.